

Post Modernism

This morning my sermon is somewhat unusual and, to be frank, I am not absolutely sure what I am talking about. At this stage many of you may want to comment - "So what's new?"

Let me explain the background. In my retirement I have been asked to act as a sort of consultant or spiritual advisor or listener to various people, and somehow, like Topsy, the number has just grown. I have a Reader, a Pastoral Assistant, an Evangelist, a licensed worker, a curate, a vicar and two ordinands. It sometimes appals me to think of the damage I may be doing to the Church of England in sharing my ideas with all these people.

One of the ordinands is training on the North Thames Ministerial Training Course, which is based on Oakhill Theological College, and last autumn I asked if I could go with him one evening to experience how things were done. It so happens that one of the lectures I heard was given by a man who used to be vice-principal of London Bible College. He had a brilliant brain and his subject was "Post Modernism" or "The Post Modernist Society". I had hardly heard of the term and certainly I didn't know what it meant. But I was fascinated by what he had to say.

It seems to me that if our future clergy are being taught about Post Modernism, then perhaps we ought to know something about it also. The trouble is that it doesn't actually fit into a neat box of ideas. This is why I am not sure what I am talking about; no one else seems to be either. Our philosophers or social scientists appreciate it is there but cannot describe it in precise terms. Much of what I will share with you, I owe to the writings of Steve Chilcraft, but don't hold him responsible for my woolly understanding.

It all has to do with systems of thought. There have been three great eras in the history of thought. The first was classical

thought. That existed until about 500 years ago. It was based on the idea that truth was universal and came from God or the gods. For man to know truth it had to be revealed to him; he could not discover it by himself.

The Bible speaks of this in the letter to the Hebrews when it says:
By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command. (Heb 11:3)

How do we know that God made the world? By revelation! What about the laws by which we ought to live? The 10 commandments were given to Moses by God. When Jesus asked the disciples who they thought he was, Peter answered, "You are the Christ the Son of the living God," and Jesus said.

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man but by my Father in heaven. (Matt. 16:17)

In the classical era the real truths about life, its origins and its purpose, cannot be reasoned by man, they have to be revealed by God.

Springing from this there was a certain fatalism. God is responsible for everything. If you are ill or your crops fail, it must be because you are evil, a sinner; God is punishing you. Except within very narrow limits, man can do nothing to shape his environment; he cannot understand or discover anything unless it is revealed to him.

But about 500 years ago there was the dawn of the age of reason. In the West it became known as the Enlightenment which was a European intellectual movement that reached its high point in the 18th century. Enlightenment thinkers were believers in social progress and in the liberating possibilities of rational and scientific knowledge. Man could discover how things happened and why they happened. To over-simplify it; if it thundered, it

was not God speaking because he was angry, it was all to do with a discharge of electricity. What is more, as mankind began to understand better how things happened, we were able to influence and control our environment; we were not left helpless before a capricious God.

Enlightenment thinkers were often critical of existing society and were hostile to religion, which they saw as keeping the human mind chained down by superstition.

Copernicus was born in 1478. He was the founder of modern astronomy and he broke with the past and put forward the novel theory that the earth went round the sun rather than that the sun went round the earth. Galileo was born 80 years later in 1564, and he supported that theory. The Church of Rome was so incensed by this heresy that he was forced to recant his ideas and he spent the last years of his life under house arrest. We may laugh at that today but it is interesting that he was only rehabilitated by the Roman Church in 1992; by which time I guess he was past caring.

For the past 500 years we have lived in the age of enlightenment where science rules supreme. It is this era of thought which is called Modernism. The clash between the Classical era and Modernism was seen very clearly in the 19th century when the Church was challenged by Darwin and the theory of evolution. By using his rational powers of reasoning, mankind was able to discover the evolutionary process (where would Steven Spielberg be without Dinosaurs?). The Church was still claiming the truth of revelation - the Bible said that the universe and everything in it was created by God in 7 days; that was a revealed truth. Scientists were claiming that it took millions of years to evolve and now they claim that the recent discovery of carbon dating proves it.

At this point let me break off to point out that the Faith and the Church, do not live in a vacuum; we are affected by the times and the environment in which we live. So it was during this time of the Age of Enlightenment that there was an emphasis on a reasoned Faith. The 39 Articles and the Westminster Confession were drawn up in this period. In the Classical era everyone believed in God; the only disagreement was which God you believed in. You had to believe in a God; what other explanation could you give for the existence of creation and of life itself? There was no need to prove that God exists. Now it is different; we can explain so many things scientifically that we have to attempt to argue people into faith - give them reasons for believing. You get books like "Who moved the Stone?" or "Evidence for the resurrection." From a religious viewpoint all this has had one very important consequence; an emphasis on facts, rather than feelings.

Have you been taught, "Don't rely on your feelings. If you have made Jesus your Lord and Saviour you are a Christian. Just hold onto that fact. It doesn't matter whether you feel saved or not; you are." Were you told that when you became a Christian? I was. That is all part of the Church responding to the prevailing environment of the age of reason or Modernism.

With that background I can begin to explain something of Post Modernism. The Classical era lasted until about the 15th century. The Modernist era has lasted for the 500 years since then, but philosophers or social scientists claim there is a change over the last two decades or so. There is always change, of course, but they say that this is something quite profound, it is a change in the way of understanding things - of thinking. Because it is happening now and we are living our lives while it is going on, it is difficult to stand back and explain exactly what it is. That is why I said I am not sure I know what I am talking about - no one is; but nevertheless the change is there.

No longer do science and carefully reasoned argument reign supreme. They have failed to deliver the goods. For 500 years we have believed that if only we could gain more knowledge and greater control over our environment, then we would create heaven on earth. We would abolish disease and there would be no more suffering. We had worked out the right economic system - capitalism. But that didn't seem to work properly so a better alternative was put forward - socialism in its purest form, Communism. But Thatcherism, amongst other things, has made many doubt that Capitalism is the way of economic salvation for all (a few get rich, the majority get poorer) and over the past 20 years Communism has proved a failure also. Science and reason are being questioned as the solution for mankind.

So what is taking their place? Post Modernism. Truth is no longer absolute or universal. You must find what is true for you. What gives you enjoyment? what makes you feel good? Ah! did you notice? feel good. If it makes you feel good then that is real for you, it is true for you. So follow that through - mind you, there is a caveat. Young people today, or many of them, have a high sense of justice. I have a right to follow what is right for me, but you must have a right to follow what is right for you. Does life become meaningful for you if you take drugs? Do you feel good then? Great, then take them. Does authority try to stop you? Why should they? You are not forcing them to take drugs, so why should they try to stop you?

Do you believe you are a homosexual; do you find fulfilment in a relationship with someone of the same sex.? Then that is real for you, that is true for you. Don't try to tell me that there is an absolute universal truth revealed by God in the Bible. That is Classical thought. Don't try to tell me that reason shows that the male and female anatomies show that man was made for woman,

and woman for man; that is Modernism. What makes life good for you? Then that is truth for you - at least for the present time.

What about religion? You believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that he died for your sins and has been raised to life, and you have made him your Lord and Saviour. Does that make you feel good and secure? Great, man! Go for it. If that turns you on and gives you meaning for life, then that is truth for you. Don't let anyone stop you believing it. But don't try to make anyone else believe it just because it works for you. And certainly don't you try to force your ideas about Sunday trading on the nation as a whole.

What about abortion and euthanasia? You have strong views about those? That's fine, so don't let anyone force you to have an abortion or force you to accept euthanasia, because that is truth - for you. But it isn't for me. I will let you have your truth and you let me have mine.

Steve Chilcraft writes this. "Modernity was highly optimistic that humanity could solve its problems; post modernity is deeply pessimistic. Modernity lived for the future; post modernity lives for the present." Modernity says it is worth suffering a bit now because it will bring a better future. Post modernity isn't sure there is a future; perhaps now is all there is, so get the most out of it you can.

"Feelings and the senses are reinstated as prime sources of knowledge. The intuitive may take precedence over the cerebral. One may feel something is right rather than know it. No one can claim they have the truth but merely that it is true for them."

Let me give you an illustration of a practical effect of this - Shopping. In the past you went shopping in order to buy necessities and perhaps a few luxuries. You didn't stop to think if

you enjoyed it. You might have enjoyed talking to the shop keeper, but that was personal interchange, not the experience of shopping. Let me tell you about Fred. A high-light of his week is Tuesday because then he can get a free bus from Maidstone Road to take him to Sainsbury's supermarket at Aylesford business Park. The bus wends it way through the villages on the way. He treats himself to breakfast in their restaurant which is a special offer. Then he does his weekly shop before catching the free bus back. Shopping has become an enjoyable and exciting experience.

So what does this have to say about Sunday Trading? For the Church to claim that the revealed truth of Scripture proclaims that you should not work on the Sabbath, or for reason and science to say that the human body needs one day's rest in seven and that there is only so much money which people spend anyway so why spread it over 7 days instead of 6? is meaningless when you can go to Lakeside at Thurrock on Sunday. That isn't just shopping, that is a total experience. There is life and bustle. A warm, exciting atmosphere with glass lifts going up and down, plenty to see and then the family can go and eat at one of the many interesting food counters on the top floor. If you can get a table overlooking the central well where you can watch everything going on - even better. It's a day out, like going to the sea-side in summer. You feel good. Who is talking about revealed or reasoned truth? this is real man!

I said a little earlier that the Church does not exist in a vacuum; it is affected by the age and environment in which it lives: and that is right. We cannot and should not be isolated as some holy huddle. It is often said that whilst the Gospel of the Kingdom does not change, the way we convey that Gospel must change in order to reach people of different cultures. Let me mention just two areas where, it seems to me, the Church has already been

affected by post modernism - probably without us realising that it is part of the post modernist culture.

First, in our worship songs. Until about 20 years ago there were the great old hymns which were in every hymn book. Every churchgoer knew and loved them and the words expressed the great doctrines of the faith. But how many of our children know them? We hardly ever sing them these days.

What do we sing? We sing choruses which make us feel good because they have a good tune and rhythm. Do you ever stop to analyse the words to think just what we are singing? Sometimes they are banal in the extreme. And even when they are true, have you noticed the thoughts they convey? So many of them have to do with our feelings or, more likely *my* feelings. "When I survey the wondrous cross" has been replaced by, "When I feel the touch of your hand upon my life" and, "There is a Green Hill far away" by, "There is no place I'd rather be than in your arms of love". I am not making a point here of what I like or what is better. I am just drawing your attention to the fact that in recent years Christian songs and choruses appeal to feelings much more than to the absolute doctrinal truths of the age of modernism.

The other area where it seems that the Church has been affected by the post modernistic approach is the Charismatic movement. There is an emphasis on experiencing the power of God; receiving personal revelations of truth in prophecy and words of knowledge, and the mobilisation of all the senses in worship. No longer is there such an emphasis on believing the right things and don't worry about your feelings. You should expect to have some experience of God in your life through his Holy Spirit. Our faith isn't all about the future, pie in the sky when you die. It should be real now. And, of course, both of these are true. The future is more than this life, but Jesus did speak about us having joy now and that our joy should be full.

So I hope you understand what I am saying. I am not condemning Post Modernism in the way that the Church of the Classical era condemned the age of enlightenment. I am simply pointing out the change that is happening. The old way of thinking is yielding to a new way. Steve Chilcraft comments, "We need to incorporate some aspects of post modernism into church life while resisting some of its assertions."

Well, my time is up, and I have only *touched* on the changes and implications of post modernism; there is so much more to say. I am not quite sure of the value of what I have tried to do this morning; indeed, if it does have a value.

What I have attempted to do is to alert you to the fact that there has been a change in the culture, in the way that people out there in the world are thinking, especially those under 30 and 40. So we who are over 40 and especially really old people like me, will not just bemoan the changes and say, "tut-tut, how dreadful it all is." There are opportunities. If the social scientists are right, people no longer think science and man's reason can save the world, so there is an opportunity for us to offer the way of the kingdom and of the King, Jesus Christ.

That lecturer I heard last autumn said: "Post modernism offers a tremendous opportunity for evangelism, but it makes training disciples even more difficult." Perhaps Steve Chilcraft is expressing the same truth when he says, "Personal testimony of what God has done can communicate powerfully, while proclamation of absolute truth is met with great scepticism."

All this simply emphasises the truth of what Christ knew very well. Whatever the era and culture of thought may be, nothing can commend the Kingdom of God so much as a group of men

and women, convinced of the truth they know and who live it out in their lives before a needy world.